The **Letters of Samuel Rutherford** are a collection of personal epistles written by the Scottish Puritan pastor and theologian **Samuel Rutherford** (1600–1661).[1] They are widely regarded as a masterpiece of Christian devotional literature, famously described by Charles Spurgeon as "the nearest thing to inspiration which can be found in all the writings of mere men."[2]

The following breakdown details the origin, recipients, and key themes of these letters.

1. Historical Context: The "Prisoner of Hope"[3]

Most of the letters were written between **1636 and 1638**. Rutherford was originally the pastor of the small parish of **Anwoth**, Scotland, where he was deeply loved for his diligent pastoral care.[4] However, he came into conflict with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities for his Presbyterian views and his refusal to conform to Anglican liturgical practices imposed by the crown.[5]

As punishment, he was **banished to Aberdeen**.[6] While he was not in a dungeon, he was under "house arrest" within the city and strictly forbidden from preaching.[7] It was during this painful period of silence and separation from his flock that he wrote the majority of these letters.[8] He frequently signed them as "Christ's Prisoner" or wrote that they were from his "Palace in Aberdeen."

2. The Recipients

The letters were not originally written for publication; they were private correspondence sent to a wide variety of people, including:

- **Parishioners of Anwoth:** Ordinary farmers and laypeople whom he missed dearly.[9]
- **Nobility:** Figures such as Lady Kenmure, to whom he acted as a spiritual director.[10]
- **Fellow Ministers:** Encouraging them in their theology and endurance.[11]
- **Bereaved Friends:** Offering comfort to those who had lost children or spouses.[12]

3. Key Themes

The letters are less about academic theology and more about the **experiential reality of knowing Christ**.[13]

- **The Loveliness of Christ:** Rutherford is famous for his use of "nuptial" imagery, often drawing from the *Song of Solomon* to describe the intense love between Christ and the believer.[14]

- **The Sweetness of Suffering:** A central theme is that suffering is not a sign of God's absence, but a unique opportunity for intimacy.[15] He famously noted that he found more of Christ in his "prison" than he ever did in his "parsonage."

- **The Transience of Life:** He frequently reminds his readers that life is "but a span-length" and that eternity is the only reality worth investing in.
- **Assurance:** He counsels many correspondents who struggle with doubt, constantly pointing them away from their own spiritual performance and toward the sufficiency of Christ.

4. Famous Quotes

The letters are filled with memorable aphorisms that have been quoted for centuries:

- *"Grace grows best in winter."*[16]

- *"The cross of Christ is the sweetest burden that I ever bore; it is such a burden as wings are to a bird, or sails to a ship, to carry me forward to my harbour."*[17]

- *"Build your nest on no tree here; for you see God hath sold the forest to death."*[18]

- *"Believe God's word and power more than you believe your own feelings and experiences.*[19] *Your Rock is Christ, and it is not the Rock which ebbs and flows, but your sea."*[20]

5. Publication and Legacy

The letters were collected and published in **1664**—three years after Rutherford's death—by his former student and secretary, Robert McWard, under the title *Joshua Redivivus*.[21]

They have remained in print ever since and were a favorite of historical figures such as **Robert Murray M'Cheyne**, **Richard Baxter**, and **George Whitefield**.[22] The most popular modern edition was edited by **Andrew Bonar** in 1891, which contains 365 letters.[23]

Would you like to know about the best "abridged" version to start with, as the full collection can be quite dense?